

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

UNLEASHING A MORE POTENT PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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On the eve of the successful round of auto negotiations with Japan in July of 1995, a letter bearing the name of the U.S. Embassy Minister for Economic Affairs, Jon Penfold, appeared prominently in the Japanese press. Written in simple to understand Japanese, it laid out the U.S. case, and it described our modest objectives in that negotiation.

The impact of the letter hit like a bombshell in Japan. It directly contradicted the assertions that Japanese government sources had been making for months in the same newspapers. (It also created a stir in the Washington-based U.S. team, for it had caught U.S. Trade Representative Mickey Kantor and his staff off-guard.)

A week later, in a packed hall in a Geneva hotel, Mickey Kantor announced to the world press that the U.S. and Japan had reached an historic accord on autos and auto parts.

These negotiations had dragged on for two years. Only two months before, talks between Kantor and then-MITI Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto had ended in acrimony, with the U.S. threatening to ban the import of Japanese luxury cars, and the Japanese threatening to take us before the WTO. Many factors contributed to the successful outcome. A number of people close to the negotiations credit that letter with solving a key part of the puzzle, for it undermined Japanese public arguments about U.S. objectives in the negotiation. It began to redirect Japanese public skepticism from the U.S. position to their own government's position.

As important, however, the letter allowed the Japanese automakers, who had been forbidden by their government to talk with U.S. officials, to read in simple language exactly what we would accept. That letter led to a quiet series of back-channel

discussions with the automakers that helped bring about the concessions we needed to declare an agreement in Geneva. This exercise constituted a specific, identifiable lesson in the power of public diplomacy.

SWAYING PUBLIC OPINION AS FOREIGN POLICY TOOL

Public diplomacy, already a substantial tool in America's foreign policy, could become a more effective instrument in the next ten years. Much of its potential success rides on a bureaucratic change that takes place on October 1, 1999. The U.S. Information Agency, hitherto an independent "sister agency" to the State Department, will become fully integrated into State. If conceptualized and managed properly, the reorganization could lead to more public diplomacy successes like the one recounted above.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: WHAT IS IT?

The President of the United States leads American public diplomacy. He often announces new U.S. policies, or seeks to influence international actors, through pronouncements to the press. President Clinton's admonition on September 10 to the Indonesian leadership regarding East Timor, delivered to the White House press corps at 40,000 feet aboard Air Force One, represents only the most recent example of the immediacy and global reach of a President's public diplomacy powers.

America's top diplomat, the Secretary of State, has also traditionally exercised a highly public role, spending considerable amounts of time conveying U.S. policy to domestic and international audiences through television appearances and press interviews. The National Security Advisor traditionally maintains a similar public

profile. The Secretary of Defense also plays a leading role when U.S. national security issues are involved. Finally, the State Department press spokesman articulates evolving foreign policy on a daily basis. (So does the Pentagon spokesman, especially when U.S. forces are engaged.)

Beyond this highly visible group lies a large public affairs machinery. Historically, State Department officers draft press guidance, seek clearances from interested bureaucratic participants, and forward it to the Spokesman for dissemination. The U.S. Information Agency has borne responsibility for conveying these positions to the wider public.

USIA - MANAGING MULTI-FACETED PROGRAMS

Aside from the ongoing work of publicly articulating specific policies, USIA has long administered an endeavor that can perhaps best be summed up as getting to know the U.S. better. Through increased exposure to the U.S., the argument goes, foreign opinion leaders become more understanding of and therefore more receptive to U.S. policies. The International Visitor Program (IVP), for example, brings future foreign leaders identified by our Embassies to the U.S. for an intensive, three-week visit across the country. Many give it high marks for identifying potential leaders. At one point in the mid-1980's, fifteen serving prime ministers in Western Europe had received IVP grants. USIA also sponsors outward-directed programs, sending U.S. experts on speaking tours abroad. It also manages the prestigious Fulbright program, which brings foreign scholars to U.S. academic institutions and sends American scholars to foreign universities for an exchange year.

Exercising yet another core function, today's USIA reports to Washington the tenor of foreign public opinion regarding issues of interest to the U.S. government using several methods, including sending editorials to Washington and engaging pollsters to research specific topics.

PROMOTING AMERICAN CULTURE: A THING OF THE PAST

Until about two decades ago, America's public affairs diplomats promoted American culture abroad as a core activity. They provided funding and administrative arrangements for travelling U.S. orchestras, dance groups, and similar organizations. In recent years, this activity has all but ceased for several reasons. Chief among them: the belief that foreigners already have open access to American culture and as Congress has scaled back budgets, this no longer constitutes a core activity. Finally, many also believe that cultural activities should generate enough revenue to support themselves. In the event of a shortfall, the private sector, not the taxpayer, should take responsibility.

Interestingly, government support of culture remains a key aspect of other countries' public diplomacy. The Japanese Government brings koto players to Trinidad, The Canadian Government sponsors Canadian art shows in Atlanta, and the Greeks bring a dance troupes to Germany, all in the interest of exposing their country's culture to others.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SPECIFIC POLICY GOALS: THE CURRENT REGIME

In the State Department it normally falls to Foreign Service generalists to draft guidance, senior Department officials to articulate it, and USIA managers to disseminate it. Besides the Secretary of State and Spokesman senior officers comprise the Deputy Secretary, the Under Secretaries and the Assistant Secretaries. These officials make public policy through testimony to the Hill, speeches, or during background briefings, typically during a major event such as a state visit.

Senior officers may call on lower level officials--a desk officer, for example -- to provide further background to the press, drawing on his detailed knowledge. In virtually all of these instances, these mid-grade Foreign Service generalists are reacting to requests for briefings, and not offering their wisdom voluntarily. In most cases, a member of the American press calls to request background information. These mid-grade officers generally take pains not to stray from established policy. They simply providing a more detailed level of background.

In U.S. Embassies, the division of responsibility mirrors that in Washington. The Ambassador acts as the principal articulator of policy, and his press attache' (almost always a USIS Officer) coordinates press guidance and disseminates it to the local press. Substantive Embassy officers provide input to the Ambassador, and occasionally brief the press directly, again providing detailed expertise on specific issues.

WHAT'S MISSING?

The current regime lacks potentially powerful leverage in public policy creation because mid-level substantive experts currently do not embark on a systematic and sustained effort to formulate and carry out a strategy designed to sway public opinion.

Substantive officers at home and abroad can often identify how negative public opinion impedes success on the specific issues they work. In addition, they can often identify specific articles or members of the press who contribute to this difficulty. These experts often understand better than anyone in the U.S. Government which audiences abroad resist specific diplomatic initiatives and why. They probably have a good idea what arguments will work best on that audience. They know what essential facts are not being conveyed, perhaps in the process creating negative opinion. They often speak the language of the country well enough to speak confidently in public while simultaneously maintaining a firm grasp of the issue. They may be the only government officials in an Embassy or consulate capable of doing so. Yet, they rarely take the initiative to counter negative public opinion.

Why?

It boils down to bureaucratic culture.

Foreign Service Officers generally do not think of themselves as public diplomacy practitioners. To be sure, they deliver the occasional speech at a conference in the country to which they are assigned, and they may even allow themselves to be quoted in the newspaper. But it goes against the cautious, discreet culture of the Foreign Service nature to seek out opportunities to appear on radio call-in shows or television news interviews. By so doing, they fear, they are usurping the powers of the Ambassador or senior Department officials. Currently, senior managers are not calling on their subordinates to fashion and execute public policy related to their own issues. In addition, Foreign Service Officers often harbor a strong wariness about the press, especially the American version, who bear a well-deserved reputation for aggressiveness and zeal in

their hunt for a sufficiently controversial story. (In the experience of the writer, the press of other countries may not be so inclined. Often they are curious and pleased with the opportunity to hear the point of view of American officials.)

Our Foreign Service generalists hold the key for a more successful public diplomacy. Diplomats working in the field need to take responsibility for devising an active public affairs strategy for every issue that needs favorable local public opinion to succeed. In the case of an economic officer working to garner host country support for an environmental issue, for example, she should no longer be content with a public affairs strategy limited to drafting press points for the Ambassador to use in the next press interview. Rather, the officer would seek out the opportunity to do an interview herself. It might mean asking to be a guest on a radio call-in show, or calling in to a radio call-in show. It could include accepting a speaking engagement, and asking the organizers to invite members of the press whom the officer thinks will be interested.

The integration of USIA and State provides the best opportunity for traditionally camera-shy diplomats to take on this new role. (Certainly USIA officers will now be taking roles that until now were the domain of generalist Foreign Service Officers. For example, in September 1999 a USIA officer became Director for Canadian Affairs.)

RISKY BUSINESS?

Encouraging lower-level Foreign Service Officers to become more active in public affairs carries risks. The approach risks diluting the authority of the most visible senior public opinion leaders by allowing other foreign affairs

practitioners to become public advocates on specific issues. The public in a foreign country might be confused about what policy and who is in authority if they receive information from sources other than the ones they expect. Also, a previously unfamiliar voice using different phraseology, and speaking in a foreign language may not be conveying the points exactly as the policy maker in Washington intends. At a minimum, this call for more public affairs activity carries the danger of exacerbating misperceptions. Finally, the officer may indeed be free-lancing, thereby causing difficulties for U.S. policy coherence.

These risks actually exist. Take the auto case. Mickey Kantor and his staff were mightily displeased when they learned about the article, and they thought it was free-lancing on the part of the Embassy officers. (For the record, Ambassador Walter Mondale had approved the letter.)

But the rewards often far outweigh the risks. In the auto case, once the Japanese public understood better specific U.S. goals, they no longer feared an agreement on terms acceptable to the U.S. Hence, the Japanese became more favorably disposed to accept the historic accord reached ten days later.

We may already be moving in the direction of encouraging Foreign Service generalists to break out of the mindset that diplomacy should only be conducted quietly, away from the glare of media attention. For example, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada has recently called upon his country team to seek out press opportunities to advance the U.S. agenda with that country. In any case, the U.S. pursues a very broad diplomatic agenda, and we cannot expect to rely alone on amplifying the occasional utterances of

senior U.S. policy makers on every conceivable topic to move mobilize the requisite public acceptance of our positions.

On the other side of the ledger, vast amounts of media confront the public of most countries. The notion that an expert diplomat who raises attention to his issues will crowd out other important U.S. foreign policy messages seems unreasonable. Finally, Foreign Service Officers have a well-deserved reputation for exercising care and circumspection, so the prospect of getting seriously off-message is an acceptable risk. After all, their purpose in exercising a more active public diplomacy would be to move forward a well-accepted foreign policy agenda item.

CONCLUSION

Public diplomacy can become a much more effective policy tool for the United States in coming years. For that prospect to become a reality, however, we must prompt our diplomats to make public diplomacy a central part of their strategy. When they do, we should see positive results.